

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO CALVIN AND HIS *INSTITUTES*

A Brief Biography of Calvin:¹

Jean Cauvin ('John Calvin' when Latinized) was born in Noyon France in 1509, the son of a notary and legal secretary for the bishop and cathedral there. His mother was a pious Roman Catholic, and Calvin's early life was illustrated in such colors. Calvin's father, due to his position, knew some of the more wealthy citizens of Noyon and thereby secured his son's early education. To provide for his later education, Calvin's father secured endowments for him from the bishop. The expectation was that Calvin would enter the clergy in some way when he reached maturity. In 1523 Calvin enrolled in the College de la Marche in the University of Paris – he was 14 years old. He took his Master of the Arts degree in 1528 at 18 years of age. Because his father had a falling out with the bishop of Noyon, he changed his mind about Calvin's future occupation and sent him to study law at Orleans – the home of the most renowned faculty of law in France at the time; think Harvard Law. In 1529 Calvin moved and continued his studies at Bourges where many of the new wave of law scholars were congregating. He completed his licentiate in law in 1532 at the age of 22.

Although Calvin trained – and trained well – as a lawyer in deference to his father's wishes, his true love was humanistic scholarship and he spent time studying Greek and Hebrew on the side. His first publication was a commentary on the great Roman stoic, Seneca – a work of great learning and style, but little impact. Along the way Calvin also came into contact with Luther's teachings and others sympathetic with reform, and eventually he threw his lot in that corner. One thing leads to another, and he eventually found himself on the run. For a time he stayed with friends in various parts of France and Switzerland, writing the first edition of his *Institutes*. It was published in Basel under a pseudonym in 1536 and began flying off the booksellers' stands. The Protestants – especially the French speaking ones – had found a learned new champion. Calvin slipped out of Basel as his book was being published and continued his itinerant lifestyle. But, in time, he decided that he needed to find a quiet corner of the Protestant world in which to set up shop to live the peaceful life of a scholar. He set his sights on

¹ Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).

Strasburg, but there was a war on between France and Germany and the direct route to Strasburg was blocked. So, he detoured through Geneva.

Calvin intended to stay in Geneva one night, but Guillaume Farel heard that the young author of the *Institutes* was in town, decided that Geneva needed him – the town had only recently declared for the Reformation – and went to pay Calvin a visit. He found Calvin entirely uninterested in the prospect of remaining in Geneva as a preacher. So, Farel resorted to his only weapon – calling down curses from heaven upon Calvin if he should shirk the responsibility being foisted upon him. Calvin capitulated. It was 1536. By 1538 he had been dismissed – the Genevan people weren't yet ready for the hardcore reform that Calvin had in mind – and was finally on his way to Strasburg. Martin Bucer was the leading reformer in Strasburg, and he took an interest in Calvin and secured for Calvin a modest livelihood as pastor to a small congregation of French exiles. Calvin remained at that post until returning to Geneva – after having virtually been begged to return – in 1541. He would remain in his post as preacher there for the rest of his life (d. 1564). Coincidentally, Calvin married Idelette de Bure in 1540. Calvin served as a devoted father to her two children from a previous marriage, and she bore him a son in 1542 but he died in infancy. Idelette died in 1549 and Calvin was uninterested in remarrying. All indications are that the union between him and Idelette was one of great mutual affection.

A Brief History of the *Institutes*:

It has already been said that Calvin first published his *Institutes* in 1536. This edition was very short – nothing like the two volume behemoth that we use today – and was comprised of only six chapters (1 – Law, with an explanation of the Decalogue; 2 – Faith, with an exposition of the Apostles' Creed, 3 – Prayer, with an exposition of the Lord's Prayer; 4 – Sacraments; 5 – Five False Sacraments; 6 – Christian Freedom, Church Power, Church and State).² Calvin continued to revise this work throughout the remainder of his life, taking it through numerous editions in both Latin and French. The primary Latin editions are as follows: 1536, 1539, 1543, 1550, 1559. The form we generally use today – the best edition of which is the McNeil/Battles edition – is the 1559 Latin. The McNeil/Battles rendition of this edition provides the reader with a critical

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, ed. Ford Lewis Battles, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

apparatus to help you ascertain in which edition various pieces of the text first appeared (see xxvii).

Fun fact: Princeton Theological Seminary has the only original copy of the 1536 edition in the Western hemisphere. B. B. Warfield travelled to Europe and found the Genevan library trying to unload extra copies of Calvin's works, with which they were burdened. So he bought a copy of this now rare volume and brought it back for the seminary. Check in with the Special Collections department the next time you are in the library and ask them to show you this and other Calvinalia.

Calvin's Intention for the *Institutes* – What kind of book is it?

When Calvin first published the *Institutes* in 1536, he intended it to be a simple and straightforward statement of Protestant doctrine. But his intentions soon changed. Soon he had a very different idea about how this book would function, and it is in pursuit of this new conception that Calvin continued to revise the work throughout his life. But, to understand Calvin's plan in these matters, we have to take a step back.

Once Calvin joined the Protestant ministry, he concluded that his calling was to biblical scholarship. This was a task for which he was uniquely suited. As a humanist, Calvin possessed all the linguistic and philological tools necessary for the performance of sophisticated biblical exegesis. Indeed, Calvin's biblical commentaries are still very much worth your time to read and can be an excellent resource for sermon preparation. All 22 volumes of these commentaries are often able to be purchased for \$100 USD or less, a paltry investment for such rich exposition. But, it was not only that Calvin was particularly equipped for such work. He surveyed the current Protestant offerings in biblical commentaries and found them wanting. In his preface to his first biblical commentary, on the book of Romans, Calvin discusses such matters. He identifies three other authors – Philipp Melanchthon, Martin Bucer, and Heinrich Bullinger – all important figures. Their commentaries, although learned and helpful in their own way, were insufficient in Calvin's mind. Melanchthon's only addressed the most important topics, and Bucer's was simply too long. Calvin set for himself the goal of "lucid brevity."³ He would treat every sentence of the biblical text, and he would do it as briefly as possible. A tall order!

³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen, Calvin Translation Society ed., Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), xxiii.

But, how could Calvin possibly achieve such brevity in his commentaries while addressing all the theological topics that necessarily arise from the biblical text? His answer to this problem is simple and elegant: he would write a separate handbook to “instruct candidates in sacred theology” – the equivalent of seminary students, that is, people like you! – “for the reading of the divine word.”⁴ The *Institutes* would be this handbook. With such a handbook in place, Calvin writes in the 1539 *Institutes*’ preface that “If, after this road has...been paved” – that is, once this handbook is in place – “I shall publish any interpretations of Scripture, I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions.”⁵ He wrote this two months prior to the publication of his Romans commentary, the preface to which we discussed in the previous paragraph.

To sum up: the *Institutes* is a handbook of doctrinal discussions intended both to teach readers the theology necessary to read Scripture well and to serve as a repository of such doctrinal discussions so that they need not mar the ‘lucid brevity’ of Calvin’s scriptural commentaries.⁶

Because Calvin is interested in making his readers into good readers of Scripture – that is, good Protestants – the order in which he presents material in the *Institutes* is not strictly speaking a logical order – an order based on the logical connections between doctrines – but a teaching order. That is, his structure is determined by what he thinks his readers need to know, and when they need to know it. Furthermore, Calvin thinks that God is the supreme pedagogue, and therefore patterns his teaching order upon God’s teaching order, that is, the ordering of Scripture. He continually tinkers with the *Institutes*’ structure toward this end. It is generally accepted among Calvin scholars that earlier post-1936 editions follow the ordering of Paul’s epistle to the Romans, and it has more recently been argued that the latter editions are structured in imitation of Scripture’s canonical order.⁷

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.

⁵ Ibid, 4-5.

⁶ Elsie Anne McKee, "Exegesis, Theology, and Development in Calvin's *Institutio*: A Methodological Suggestion," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee and Brian G. Armstrong (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1989), Elsie Anne McKee, "Some Reflections on Relating Calvin's Exegesis and Theology," in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froehlich on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991).

⁷ Stephen Edmondson, "The Biblical Historical Structure of Calvin's *Institutes*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59, no. 1 (2006).

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